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ABSTRACT

This report from a 1995 Child Care Action Campaign national audioconference examines approaches to empowering parents through developing support, leadership, advocacy, and activism to better enable low-income parents to become effective change agents. The report describes the experiences of three parent programs, which found that parents typically help their children first, recognize the interests they share with other parents, and then take an increasingly active role in programs, institutions, and public policies that directly influence their lives. The first program described, the Parent Services Project (California), offers low-income parents the opportunity to take responsibility for organizing social and educational activities and managing resources to carry them out. This program confirms to the child care center staff that parents are assets to their children's development. The second program, Parent Leadership Institute (Connecticut), trains parents to work as community activists and child advocates in school systems and local government. Parents who participated in this 9-month training program have raised funds and organized courses for parents in their children's schools, and have effectively dealt with city government officials to rectify dangerous situations in the school. The third program, Parents United for Child Care (Massachusetts), has organized 1,500 parents to identify, lobby for, and pursue specific improvements in child care funding and programs to meet their family needs. This group has expanded school-age child care, developed and expanded care and education for preschool children, and increased child care funding for welfare recipients and working poor participants in education and training. (KB)

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ISSUE BRIEF

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Empowering Parents: Developing Support, Leadership, Advocacy, and Activism

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Child Care Action Campaign

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Introduction

Children in low-income families are increasingly at risk of falling into poverty due to federal reforms of cash assistance, food, and child care programs, which restructure federal-state relationships and push funding and authority for child care and other vital services to the states. Governors, legislators, and other state leaders are planning to enact sweeping changes in child care, welfare, health and other vital programs upon which low-income families, many of them working, depend. In addition, counties, cities, and communities are expecting to take on new and unfamiliar tasks and roles. Yet, low-income parents are rarely organized or engaged in shaping this momentous reform agenda, even though they and their families will bear the brunt of the changes.

Thus, across America, advocates, child care and social service providers, unions, community-based organizations, elected officials, and others seeking to strengthen the nation's democratic system are posing this central, critical question: How can low-income parents be supported and encouraged to participate in shaping the state and local decisions that will directly affect their work life, their health care, and their children's present well-being and future life chances?

To explore these questions, Child Care Action Campaign (CCAC) convened a national audioconference on September 14, 1995. Barbara Reisman, CCAC executive director, opened the audioconference with a call to action. As block grant dollars reach states and open the door to a myriad of social experiments, Reisman said, it is critical that all those concerned about children, especially their parents, be at the table to influence how states and localities spend money for services, like child care, that enable poor and low-income families to work.

As a form of assistance and inspiration to advocates and leaders everywhere, CCAC invited spokespersons for effective parent-involvement strategies to participate in the audioconference. These presenters described how to engage parents effectively as participants and decision makers by reference to the following models:

- The Parent Services Project at child care centers in California offers low-income parents the opportunity to take responsibility for organizing social and educational activities and managing resources to carry them out.

- The Parent Leadership Institute in Connecticut trains parents to work as community activists and child advocates in school systems and local government.

- Parents United For Child Care in Massachusetts has organized 1500 parents to identify, lobby for, and in other ways pursue specific improvements in child care funding and programs to meet their family needs.

Together the three strategies exhibit multiple forms of parent "involvement," "empowerment," "leadership," and "advocacy," terms that are distinct in meaning but often linked in practice. Together these strategies reveal that in every arena touching the lives of families, parents can become effective agents for change and that they often pursue a similar path: first, by helping their own children; second, by recognizing the interests they share in common with other par-

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Issue Brief

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ents; and third, by taking an increasingly active role in programs, institutions, and public policies that directly affect their lives.

These three programs are particularly responsive to low-income families that have fewer opportunities than families of higher income to join organizations or social groups where they can acquire skills of participation and decisionmaking. Yet parents face many issues in common regardless of income. The achievements of these models send the vital message that parents working together can change the world for children.

Parent Services Project: The Opportunity to Make Decisions

The Parent Services Project (PSP) of California was founded in 1980 by the Zellerbach Family Fund in San Francisco to use child care centers to provide supportive services to low-income parents. One of these sites is Gardener Children's Center, which provides child care for approximately 180 children and offers essential services to their predominantly working parents, because "looking at the child in the context of the family is the only way that really makes sense," according to Fred Ferrer, the executive director. The center staff emphasizes meeting parents' needs, because parents who satisfy their own needs are better able to take care of their children.

Gardener Children's Center has abandoned the traditional models of family support that attempt to "fix" families. In the past, recalled Ferrer, staff "would...develop lists of workshops. We would strong-arm parents to fill out these checklists . . . and then we would organize and have workshops."

Now, parents make their own choices about workshops and other activities that will help them. At each year's first social event, or "wish night," Gardener's staff invites parents to become acquainted and discuss their desires for their families for the coming year. Parents are encouraged to define their needs and goals and then formulate plans to meet these goals through the center. Parents quickly learn that they have a say in the center's plans for the year.

Following "wish night," a smaller group of parents, the Parent Action Council (PAC), is chosen to provide leadership for the year. The PAC meets regularly to decide how to organize the year's programs and manage program finances, for which they are given full responsibility. Parents thereby gain experience both in working together to achieve a common goal and in developing financial responsibility and leadership in managing discretionary funds.

Looking at the child in the context of the family is the only way that really makes sense.
—FRED FERRER

Using these methods, parents at the Gardener Children's Center have organized classes and workshops on nutrition, gardening, and car repair; family outings for parents and children to the zoo, camping, and potlucks; adult-only activities such as dances, mothers' clubs, and fathers' breakfasts; sick-child care during working hours; and emergency and respite child care on Saturdays, weekends, and overnight. Parent involvement in designing programs ensures that PSP activities are culturally relevant and well-attended because the parents have a stake in them.

By participating in the PSP programs, parents discover what they have in common—a concern about their children. They also discover the power they have individually and as a group to make changes to improve their children's lives. PSP gives leadership opportunities to parents who do not have such opportunities in their jobs or in most social situations. It also confirms to the center staff that parents are assets, not barriers, to their children's development.

Connecticut Parent Leadership Institute: Training for Activism

The Parent Leadership Institute (PLI) of the Connecticut Commission on Children trains parents as community activists and child advocates in the school system and local government. The institute's philosophy was aptly expressed by the commission's executive director, Elaine Zimmerman: "There is an untapped jewelry box of parents who are inherent leaders who don't get called upon. They are underutilized by policy makers, and we need to change that."

PLI was created in 1992 to fill a vacuum in parent leadership training and "to empower parents with the knowledge, skills, and confidence they need to interact with society to effect positive change for families." The typical PLI program consists of a nine-month course divided into three semesters. During the first semester, parents meet weekly or bi-weekly for intensive group training in leadership. In the second semester, parents learn how to analyze and influence state and local politics. They learn how to read and interpret local ordinances, write editorials, evaluate programs, read budgets, form coalitions, speak publicly, and work with the media. In the third semester, parents develop an action plan and practice their skills in a self-designed practicum that engages them in making real changes in their communities.

Using their own action plans with timelines and cost figures, PLI students have organized a number of initiatives including a program for grandparents who are raising their grandchildren and a strategy for involving fathers in children's issues. PLI graduates have become leaders in their communities, often appearing on television and writing newspaper articles to speak up on child care, education reform, and neighborhood revitalization.

There is an untapped jewelry box of parents who are inherent leaders who don't get called upon. They are underutilized by policy makers, and we need to change that.
—ELAINE ZIMMERMAN

The commission markets PLI through churches, libraries, local departments of parks and recreation, and mayoral offices and finds that many parents are "motivated to enter the leadership program by a strong desire to make things right" for their children. Nonetheless, Zimmerman finds that parents, when they firrst hear about PLI, often do not feel they belong at the table with decisionmakers. They say, "Who are we? Parents have no right to affect policy." Parents with little leadership or work experience can be especially uncomfortable in the decisionmaking process because they find the language and procedures of elected officials and administrators unfamiliar. The Institute dignifies parents by enabling them to become change agents within the community.

PLI focusses on building skills for change by linking participation to practices and policies that can be enacted. For example, one participant wanted to expand

When was the first time you took a stand to defend your child? When we heard that question, we realized we had a common goal.
—AIDA MORALES

opportunities in the public school system by starting evening programs for children and bringing more technology into the schools. The commission has found that parents "are eager to participate when they believe it will make a difference in their family's lives; when they feel supported, respected, and acknowledged for their time and effort; and when they develop a sense of ownership that the leadership is theirs."

Aida Morales is a PLI graduate who has used her training to improve public education in Hartford. Morales, a native of Puerto Rico, a former welfare client, and the mother of three young girls, was not interested in education or policy until four years ago. At that time, she attended a school open house after her two oldest daughters experienced problems with Hartford's bilingual education program. Shortly after the open house, she attended a community meeting that, for the first time, was choosing representatives to the school parent-teacher organization. After being chosen as a representative, to her surprise, Morales was in short order nominated to become vice-president. Later, a church organization heard of Morales' volunteer efforts at her children's school, gave her information about PLI, nominated her, and sponsored her application.

During her first day at PLI, Morales attended a retreat with 24 other participants to kick off their nine-month training course. She remembers that all of the parents felt nervous and isolated, until they were asked the question: "When was the first time you took a stand to defend your child?" "When we heard that question, we realized that we had a common goal...the love of our children and the interest in how we as parents can move forward in a leadership role to impact what's taking place in our city with our children and other children." The parents all realized they were on common ground with a common purpose.

After graduating from PLI, Morales became president of the parent-teacher organization at her children's school. In that capacity, she raised funding and organized language and high school equivalency courses for parents in their children's schools. She also attended meetings of community and parent organizations throughout Hartford.

On one particular occasion, Morales recounts, she drew on all the skills she learned at PLI to respond to a crisis caused by the gradual cave-in of the roof of her children's elementary school. As the crisis worsened, children's schedules were disrupted and parent programs were cancelled. In spite of the growing problem, Morales felt that nobody in the community was paying attention, so she decided to take action. Remembering her study of city ordinances at PLI, she located and analyzed two ordinances about emergency situations that mandated remedial actions by the city council and mayor. Armed with this information, Morales attended a city council meeting to testify about the problems and urged council members to comply with their own ordinances.

Morales received a response in writing describing the process that the council would follow to correct the situation, and the mayor and school board met with the community to tell them what the city was doing. The community continued

to receive regular information from the city, and the repair work was completed on time. Morales has since been appointed a member of the Hartford Board of Education and is a part-time outreach worker at PLI.

Parents United for Child Care: Building Constituencies for Change

Parents United for Child Care (PUCC) of Boston, Massachusetts, fosters parent advocacy and activism by engaging parents in defining issues, advocacy, and coalition-building. PUCC, an organization of ethnically diverse low- and moderate-income parents, whose executive director is Elaine Fersh, shows how effective a group of parents can be. Since its founding in 1987, PUCC has expanded school-age child care, developed and expanded care and education for children ages three to five, and increased child care funding for AFDC recipients and working poor participants in education and training. Thanks to these successes, PUCC membership has mushroomed from 150 parents in 1988 to 1,500 in 1995.

Since 1993 PUCC has documented the need for child care services for preschoolers. It has also organized parents to testify at public forums about the lack of child care subsidies for working families, the lack of information about services, and the need for wrap-around programs for children of working parents who attend half-day kindergartens. PUCC works "in local neighborhoods to find out what parents say about gaps in services, so funds are spent on programs that parents define, not just on what providers want to do."

PUCC derives its strength from numbers and high visibility. Since capturing public attention with its first child care forum in 1988, PUCC has effectively worked to direct the attention of the media and elected officials to parents' stories about the difficulties of finding good quality, affordable child care. Fersh says that PUCC has been "very successful . . . in targeting particular legislators who have not been particularly interested in child care issues, cultivating a relationship with them, and getting them to come out into their district." At key times in the budget process, PUCC has succeeded in persuading these legislators to initiate or support amendments critical to restoring or increasing child care funds.

Parents need to have a vote in defining, planning, and setting policy. It's necessary to get parents organized as a constituency that is defining the issues.
—ELAINE FERSH

PUCC's Parents Agenda Project (PAP) teaches Massachusetts parents how to lobby state officials and work with the media. PAP works with parents in public speaking workshops to help them become more comfortable about telling their stories and "engaging their legislators so that their legislators understand what the issues are and how they affect parents and their community." PAP also provides information through statewide mailings and helps parents understand that they are not the only ones who can't get a subsidy or find child care.

PAP has a history of effective action. It has led workshops on child care delivery systems; made organizing presentations to parents at child care programs and other sites; lobbied state senators and representatives to push for increased funding for low-income child care; involved 200 parents in an early childhood

forum with the Mayor of Boston, State Senators and other elected officials; facilitated a town meeting with U.S. Senate and gubernatorial candidates; placed articles in *The Boston Globe* and national publications; appeared on local and national television broadcasts; provided workshops on voter registration, voting, and lobbying legislators; and conducted voter registration drives.

PUCC's record of achievements began as soon as it was founded. Its first large project in 1988 was to organize over 150 parents to testify at citywide hearings on the need for school-age child care. Parents then helped the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women to develop and conduct a survey on the need for before- and after-school programs for children through their early teens. Distributed to 5,500 Boston-area families, the survey revealed that 25 percent of area parents left their homes for work before their children went to school. Boston officials responded to PUCC's findings by improving school bus and public transportation routes to before- and after-school programs. PUCC awarded planning grants to parents, educators, and community leaders to start more before- and after-school programs.

In 1994–1995, in response to a national competition, PUCC led a collaboration of over 60 local organizations to develop an action plan to improve the quality and delivery of before- and after-school care for low-income children in Boston. The sponsor of the competition, the DeWitt Wallace - Reader's Digest Fund, awarded three implementation grants across the country. PUCC's plan, Making the Most of Out-of-School Time (MOST), was awarded a $1.2 million grant. Over the next three years, the collaborative led by PUCC will increase the supply of out-of-school-time programs to serve an additional 1,500 children. It will also develop a college certification, credential, or degree program in school-age care; increase community access to information about programs and linkage of programs through technology with the Boston Public Library; and increase and enhance direct services for families.

Most recently, PUCC has created a workshop on welfare reform. Even in Massachusetts, whose legislature just passed a harsh welfare reform package, parents often don't relate newspaper stories about welfare reform to their own lives or understand the impact of state-level changes on child care they depend on. "It's very important to understand that parents need to be involved in all aspects of the work," states Fersh. "Parents need to have a role in defining, planning and setting policy. It's necessary to get parents organized as a constituency so that it is the constituency that is, in fact, defining many of the issues."

About the Child Care Action Campaign

Child Care Action Campaign (CCAC) is a national nonprofit coalition of individuals and organizations whose goal is to improve the lives of children and their families by expanding the supply of good quality, affordable child care. Founded in 1983, headquartered in New York, and assisted by a panel of advisors in every state, CCAC uses its information resources and strategic skills to engage parents, policymakers, business leaders, and child care providers in improving child care and early education. Through its national conferences, business roundtables, and state forums, CCAC is a catalyst for change. CCAC has led national thinking in defining child care as a bottom line economic issue and as a fundamental component of welfare reform and education reform.

About CCAC's Family Support Watch (FSW)

As part of its mission to increase the availability of good quality, affordable child care programs, CCAC established the Family Support Watch (FSW), a project to monitor the implementation of the 1988 Family Support Act and ensure that eligible families have access to the child care guaranteed by the Act. Since 1989, FSW has engaged in a wide range of policy analysis and advocacy activities including issuing reports, testifying at public and Congressional hearings, communicating to the public in print and broadcast media, distributing outreach materials to parents, and convening state administrators, advocates, and leaders through national audioconferences. In short, CCAC has tried, wherever possible, to get out the message that a child care guarantee is a crucial component of any welfare-to-work strategy and to work with state leaders to ensure that that guarantee is delivered to families.

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